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**USSR-Philippines:
Soviet Policy Since the
Aquino Assassination**

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Intelligence Memorandum

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USSR-PHILIPPINES: SOVIET POLICY SINCE THE AQUINO ASSASSINATION

Summary

Since the assassination of Benigno Aquino in August 1983 Moscow has been attempting to exploit the growing political and economic turmoil in the Philippines to undermine relations between Washington and Manila. In doing so, the Soviets are working both ends of the political spectrum. In an effort to protect and expand their position in the near term, they are cultivating President Marcos by supporting his position against the demands of the opposition movement and criticizing US pressures on Manila for economic belt-tightening and a more aggressive investigation into the Aquino assassination. At the same time, anticipating the end of Marcos's rule, Moscow is trying to expand its contacts among radical elements in the media, labor unions, student groups, and leftist intellectual circles. The Soviets hope to boost the position of the radicals and prevent pro-US moderates from gaining power when Marcos leaves the political scene.

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The Soviets openly support the efforts of the officially tolerated, pro-Soviet Communist party (PKP) to generate anti-American sentiment, and they reportedly maintain some contact with the far more powerful and militant

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Communist Party of the Philippines (CCP). There is no evidence, however, that the Soviets are providing direct support to the growing rural insurgency. [REDACTED]

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Cultivating the Marcos Regime

Since the mid-1970s, Moscow has aligned itself with the Marcos regime and withheld support for the growing opposition movement in an attempt to expand its representation in the Philippines and reduce US influence. The strategy has yielded Moscow some modest successes:

- The size of the Soviet mission in the Philippines has steadily grown. There now are approximately 70 Soviet officials assigned to their embassy, trade mission, and cultural center, four Soviets working in a joint shipping venture, and four correspondents representing Novosti, Pravda, TASS and Izvestiya.
- Marcos is the only current ASEAN head of state to have visited the Soviet Union. He traveled to Moscow in 1976 when diplomatic relations between the two countries were established.
- First Lady Imelda Marcos, who appears susceptible to Soviet flattery, has strongly supported expanded economic and cultural relations.
- Manila is the only ASEAN capital to have signed cultural agreements with the USSR, which allow the Soviets to promote a largely one-sided and increasingly active cultural relationship with the Philippines.
- Manila has supported some nonaligned positions at the UN which are similar to or identical with Soviet policies. [REDACTED]

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In an effort to curry favor with the regime, the Soviets have given Marcos favorable propaganda coverage and made a series of low-key initiatives to expand contact with influential officials. They have attempted to negotiate a variety of economic and cultural agreements to forge a larger presence. The greater Soviet presence, in turn, has provided more opportunities for Soviet covert activities designed to monitor US activities, fuel anti-American sentiment, generate opposition to US military bases in the Philippines, and project a more favorable image of the USSR. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets are apparently attempting to bypass the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the center of bureaucratic opposition to expanded relations with the USSR. The Soviets signed an agreement on sports exchanges with President Marcos's nephew, the head of the Philippine Olympic Committee, without proper coordination with the MFA. Parliamentary visits to the USSR have also been arranged without MFA involvement. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's success in cultivating the regime is, however, limited by President Marcos's staunch anti-Communism and his suspicions of Soviet subversive activities. Marcos's occasional threats to "tilt toward the Soviets," have been mainly a tactical ploy to extract better terms when the

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bases agreements are being negotiated. He appears to encourage his wife's outspoken lobbying on the Soviet's behalf as a way of ensuring that the United States does not take Manila for granted. But Marcos has continued to follow the advice of the MFA in opposing Soviet requests for access to Philippine ship repair facilities and Aeroflot landing rights. []

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Reaction to the Aquino Assassination

The Soviets have remained supportive of the Marcos regime in the wake of the assassination of Benigno Aquino and the subsequent political and economic unrest. Initial media accounts last year cited Western press reports that the ruling regime was involved in organizing the assassination, but the Soviets quickly returned to a pro-Marcos line and quoted "informed observers" in Manila who doubted opposition allegations that "ruling circles" were responsible. []

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Moscow, moreover, attempted to exploit tensions between Manila and Washington generated by the Marcos regime's handling of the assassination. Soviet media drew a link between Aquino's murder and US intelligence services, suggesting that the assassination was the "handiwork of the CIA," designed to "create a wave of antigovernment demonstrations." The Soviets publicized foreign press reports suggesting that the United States was trying to destabilize the Marcos government because Washington was dissatisfied with Manila's trade and military policies. []

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Moscow has portrayed US pressure for a full accounting of the assassination as an example of American "neocolonial policies." [] publicly, the Soviets are accusing the US of interfering in Philippine internal affairs. An Izvestiya correspondent recently claimed that the US was using the Aquino affair to discredit the Marcos government and acting as if the Philippines were still an American colony. []

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The Soviets did not report on the Agrava Board reports issued on 23-24 October which implicated the military—including General Ver, the chief of the armed forces and one of Marcos's closest advisors—in a conspiracy to murder Aquino. Moscow's reticence may reflect the efforts it has reportedly been making to develop contacts within the armed forces, a powerful interest group whose support is essential to the Marcos government. []

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Contacts with the Opposition

While hoping to capitalize on their demonstration of support for Marcos in the short term, the Soviets are trying to establish contact with leftist forces that would, if they gained control in a successor government, favor reducing ties with Washington and restricting the US military presence at Clark Air Force Base and the Subic Bay Naval Base. The fluid political situation, [] allows the Soviets greater freedom to move around and touch base with opposition forces. At the same time, however, the Soviets are careful not to jeopardize

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their status with the Marcos government by being openly identified with the most militant members of the Communist Party of the Philippines. []

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The Soviets have worked most closely with the pro-Soviet Communist party—the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP)—which, because of its renunciation of violence and lack of popular support is officially tolerated by the Marcos government. Members of the Soviet front organization, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), attempt to influence PKP activities in the labor movement. Labor has traditionally been a relatively ineffective interest group in the Philippines, but the Soviets may calculate that government austerity measures required by the recent IMF loan will breathe new life into the movement, resulting in labor unrest that will provide greater opportunity for Soviet involvement and support over the longer term. []

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The Soviets have reportedly established contacts with the more powerful and larger Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which broke away from the PKP over a decade ago, and financial assistance from Soviet front groups is probably reaching the CPP. We have no evidence however that the Soviets are directly providing weapons and ammunition to the New People's Army (NPA), the military arm of the CPP, and there are good reasons for Moscow to withhold such direct support:

- Relations with the Marcos government would be damaged if the Soviets were caught assisting the insurgents.
- ASEAN leaders would be concerned about Soviet involvement in other Southeast Asian insurgency movements if the Soviets were supporting the NPA.
- Poverty, unemployment, corruption, and alienation from the Marcos regime have all contributed to the growing influence of the CPP/NPA—without Moscow's involvement. []

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The Soviets are more likely to contact the CPP through its National Democratic Front (NDF), which operates in the relatively open urban environment. The Soviet Cultural Center in Manila serves as a meeting place between the Soviets and professors, students, and leftist lawyers—many of whom also belong to the NDF. []

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Moscow's support for the Marcos regime in the wake of the Aquino assassination suggests that the Soviets are unlikely to try to make overt common cause with the moderate opposition in the Philippines for the foreseeable future. So far, there is no evidence that the Soviets have made inroads with opposition leaders, and we do not in fact know if they have tried. Moscow may assume that attempting to court moderate leaders would be pointless, since most of them support close ties to Washington despite their opposition to Marcos. []

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Fueling Anti-American Sentiment

The Soviets are seeking to fan anti-American sentiment through propaganda, covert activities, and especially the activities of the PKP and its front organizations. The Soviet-controlled World Peace Council cosponsored a peace conference with a Philippine organization last December at the prestigious University of the Philippines that was critical of US bases in the Philippines. The PKP has also participated in rallies in front of the US Embassy denouncing the military bases. We expect that as antigovernment demonstrations grow in size and frequency the Soviets will try to encourage the PKP and its front groups to mobilize unhappiness over American support of the Marcos regime into opposition to the continued presence of US military facilities. []

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The Soviets were apparently behind a bogus USIA questionnaire that recently appeared in Manila and other ASEAN capitals. The questionnaire requested that the addressee respond to probing and personal questions, and was apparently designed to generate negative feelings toward the United States. []

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The Philippine media are a priority target for Soviet intelligence operations. The Soviets are active members of the Manila Overseas Press Club, and last year a Soviet correspondent served as president. Soviet embassy representatives are increasing social contacts with local media personnel to ease the way for TASS and Novosti placements in the most influential Manila papers. Over the past few years, the Soviets have made increased use of the editorial and feature pages in the Manila Evening Post and the Metro Manila Times for articles criticizing US policy and providing favorable coverage of Soviet society and government. []

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The Soviets apparently believe that Philippine nationalism is a potentially explosive issue and are making plans to take advantage of it. Moscow is accusing the United States of interfering in Philippine domestic affairs, at the same time that Soviet officials are trying to demonstrate that they respect Philippine nationalism. There is an increased emphasis in the Soviet Embassy on learning more about the local culture and the Tagalog language. []

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Outlook

The Soviets regard the Philippines as one of the most important long-term targets of opportunity in Southeast Asia. They undoubtedly realize that they face serious obstacles in the Philippines, including the pro-US sentiment among the majority of Philippine people, and their efforts are likely to remain careful and calculated. Thus far neither Moscow nor the radical forces have been successful in translating the current unrest into wide-spread antagonism toward Washington. The Soviets probably hope, however, that deteriorating economic and political conditions will ultimately work to undermine the US position. []

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While the Soviets are courting Marcos, they are undoubtedly preparing for a post-Marcos government. They are aware that his position was permanently eroded by the Aquino assassination and that poor health could also force him suddenly from office. There is no immediate successor apparent, and a smooth transition to new leadership is unlikely. []

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The Soviets probably hope that Marcos will be succeeded by his wife; they have actively courted her and probably anticipate that she would improve relations with the USSR. The prospect of a durable dynastic succession has declined considerably since the Aquino assassination, but there is no indication that Mrs. Marcos's succession ambitions have abated and she is likely to play an important role in the post-Marcos period. []

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The Soviets probably expect that the leftist opposition movement will play an increasingly prominent role in the months ahead. They are already building influence with leftists and will try to assist the radical elements to gain the upper hand in order to prevent the pro-US moderates from gaining power when Marcos does leave the political scene. []

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